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GRANT PROPOSAL FOR WRITING PROJECT ON

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS AND CURRENT NATO POLICY:
SOURCES OF PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK IN THE NUCLEAR ERA

Why restudy the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Because it was the Three Mile Island of the nuclear weapons era: the closest approach to a catastrophic nuclear war.

Because there is now more data available on high-level decisionmaking considerations in this crisis--including, for the first time, inside information on Soviet and Cuban decisions--than for any other; and I can integrate these data---many of which have emerged only in the last two years, some in the past month--with hitherto-unrevealed findings from my participation in the crisis and my own later official study of it.

Because the most authoritative current interpretations --still dominated by the foreign policy equivalents of nuclear power plant executives--are inadequate, mistaken or dangerously misleading, in particular misunderstanding and underestimating the risk both of non-nuclear and of nuclear war.

Because the detailed examination now possible of this episode reveals psychosocial patterns and motivations among men in power--e.g., aggression, risk-taking and deliberate confrontation, sometimes gambling with catastrophe, in preference to accepting limited but humiliating personal defeats--of continuing relevance to conflicts and risk in the post-Cold War era (as in Panama, this month).

Because the urgency of seizing the current, unprecedented opportunity to denuclearize foreign policy and to achieve the near-abolition of nuclear weapons can best be understood in terms of the real risks of this earlier "close call."¹

¹ The opportunity is based on Gorbachev's demonstrated willingness to act on his "new way of thinking in the nuclear era" by a combination of restraint, unilateral moves and serious proposals aimed at ending the division of Europe and armed confrontation within it, letting go of the Soviet empire in East

Europe, reducing and restructuring non-nuclear forces to "defensive sufficiency" and nuclear forces to mutual "minimum deterrence" as a transition to the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Already the resulting astonishing changes in East Europe and the Soviet Union have effectively eliminated the threat of a Soviet blitzkrieg in Europe, till now the principal legitimating rationale for NATO reliance on nuclear first-use threat and thus for most US nuclear weapons.

This could lead to the mutual abandonment of nuclear first-use threats and, perhaps by the end of the century, the mutual destruction of the tactical and strategic nuclear weapons that support them: if political leaders in the US, as well, could be persuaded in this new international context to take seriously and then to adopt and act upon comparable new principles of relating and behaving internationally.

That this is not impossible (it is certainly not automatic, nor even likely short of major political effort) is shown by the fact that a former Secretary of Defense has espoused what amounts to a concise statement of "the new way of thinking" as his own proposals. In the Annual Spring Lecture of the CPS\NA (May 15, 1989: Center Review Fall 1989) Robert McNamara urged a code for an international peacekeeping organization that would "provide that political interests be pursued through diplomacy, not military threats or use of force, that military forces reduce their arms and restructure themselves to be defensive, that the superpowers refrain from intervening in regional conflicts, and that political disputes and other global problems are solved through international collaboration. In principle...no nation's nuclear force need be larger than necessary to deter cheating, i.e. to deter secret building of new weapons...the number of warheads required for such deterrence would not exceed a few hundred."

McNamara concluded: "If we succeed, we can enter the 21st century [the end of this decade] with...a totally different military strategy: one of mutual security instead of war-fighting; with vastly smaller nuclear forces, no more than a few hundred weapons--in place of fifty thousand; with conventional forces in balance and in defensive rather than offensive postures; and, therefore, with a dramatically lower risk that our nation will be destroyed by unintended conflict."

The premise of this study is that a realistic knowledge of the actual dangers of the nuclear era up to now--best exemplified by the hidden history of the Cuban Missile Crisis--can contribute to motivating the painful and difficult political-psychosocial-moral work of individual and social change that can bring about the precise transformation McNamara envisions here. (It is no accident, I believe, that the man pressing this vision, Robert McNamara, was alongside Kennedy at the very center of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and of all the surviving witnesses has most consistently emphasized his sense of its dangers.)

Case Study of a Near Miss

Few have ever disagreed with the judgment that the Cuban Missile Crisis was the most dangerous episode of the nuclear era. But just how dangerous was it?

"Not very," is the emerging consensus of specialists in the subjects, who proceed to draw the related conclusion that the risks of the era as a whole have been, in reality, low and have been getting steadily lower for the beginning.²

I believe that these experts are wrong on both counts, dangerously so.

Despite the fact--revealed in recent testimony--that both US and Soviet leaderships already, in 1962, felt strongly deterred not only from nuclear but from non-nuclear conflict with each other's forces, we came as close to superpower armed conflict and possible nuclear launches that year, I believe, as Three Mile Island or Chernobyl came to a core meltdown of a nuclear reactor. Far closer, as in those cases, than any experts had earlier imagined possible, or in this case, than most experts yet perceive. Unacceptably close.

I believe that the same defense and foreign policy experts correspondingly underestimate the lesser but significant risks in other nuclear crises, both past and easily-imaginable future ones. By the same token, they fail to recognize either the urgency or the most relevant ways of reducing such risks, including opportunities offered at this moment to the NATO Alliance, first by the unilateral changes in Soviet military doctrine and deployment and then by the revolutionary political changes and the impending transformation of the military situation in East Europe. .

These judgments are based in part on my own direct participation in the Cuban Missile Crisis but much more on my highly-classified official study of that and other nuclear crises

² Thus, McGeorge Bundy, Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years, published late 1988, on the Missile Crisis: "I have argued that the risk was small, given the prudence and the unchallenged final control of the two leaders." (p. 461). And on his next to last page (616) the judgment: "Nuclear weapons have been with the world since 1945, and each ten-year period in that time has turned out to be less dangerous than the one before it....Still more plainly, the decades after Cuba have been less dangerous than before." On the preceding page he estimates that the risk of nuclear catastrophe in Cuba may have been "one in one hundred."

two years later--most of the findings from which have not yet become available to other analysts--and on my subsequent experience and study of escalation in Vietnam, as well as on information that has been newly revealed in the last two years.

In October 1962 I participated in the high-level staffwork of the Cuban Missile Crisis, serving on two of the three Working Groups reporting to the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm).

I went into that crisis as a specialist in nuclear war planning--I had drafted the Kennedy Administration's top secret guidance for the general nuclear war plans that became operational that year--and an expert on the procedures by which the execution of those plans might be ordered, either with or--as I had discovered to be possible--without the immediate authorization of the President.

I came out of the crisis feeling I had experienced the most likely way a thermonuclear war would come to pass, if it ever did. The way deterrence on both sides could fail. The way in which the plans and procedures I had studied and helped design might actually come to be acted out. A dress rehearsal for nuclear catastrophe, on the scale of a million Hiroshimas.

I determined to study that episode, and any others like it, with the best official access to information that could be achieved, to discover the faults in a system that had let us come this far along the path to a war that, surely, neither side had earlier intended or desired.

This does not mean that I set out to examine this incident --when I had found sponsorship for such a study within the government a year later--with the presupposition that nuclear war had been very close, highly probable, or missed by a very narrow margin. On the contrary, I had believed during the height of the crisis--just as many authorities do today--that the actual probability of a major war, let alone a nuclear war, erupting momentarily was extremely low.

As the blockade had tightened on Cuba, I thought then--like certain "hawks" then and now--that Khrushchev, vastly outgunned both in the Caribbean and in strategic nuclear arms, "had" to back down and could be counted on to do so, almost surely before the threshold of hot war was crossed.

Looking back just a few years later--after studying crises including this one, then participating in several that took us to war--I came to feel I had been very mistaken.

In 1964 I spent over six months studying this and other nuclear crises with interdepartmental access to highly-classified

information on this and other nuclear crises that was then virtually unprecedented and may still be so today. A sponsoring committee of officials at the deputy secretary level in State, Defense, CIA and the Staff Directorate of the Joint Chiefs of Staff assured me access to closely-held documentation in each of their respective agencies.

As I put together information some of which the highest officials had not known at the time and no one had seen whole before, it began to be clear that the overall chance of the military equivalent of a nuclear "meltdown"--without being close to certain or even as likely as not--had been significantly greater than I had supposed.

To my surprise, I discovered this inference of a "near miss" to be comparably strong in the case of at least one earlier episode, the Quemoy Crisis of 1957, which was not commonly regarded by the public or scholars to have been a nuclear crisis. (In more recent research, I have uncovered a number of other instances: see my Introduction to Protest and Survive, attached).

Moreover, in looking at a larger number of crises, not all of which had a nuclear dimension, I found patterns and phenomena of decisionmaking in crises--including psychological reactions to events threatening humiliation, and failures in understanding, in communication and in control of forces--that suggested that the potential danger in Cuba or Quemoy was not peculiar to the particular personalities involved nor their particular strategic context.

After reporting orally my major findings to the committee of departmental planners in the fall of 1964, I accepted an invitation that came at that time to continue my study of crisis decision-making from even further inside, as a highest-level civil servant (GS-18) serving as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs) observing, by participating in, the secret escalation of US intervention in Vietnam.

My preoccupation with Vietnam turned out to last 11 years. That included two years as a field observer for the Embassy in Vietnam, two years helping write and analysing lessons from the top secret history of our decision-making (the Pentagon Papers) and six years working to end our involvement, in particular by revealing what I knew about it.

What I learned of crises and hot war in that time--11 years watching vastly outgunned Vietnamese and hopelessly stalemated Americans both refusing to back down, instead crossing threshold after threshold of escalating violence--further confirmed what I had discovered in my crisis study of 1964:

We had come much closer to stumbling into a major war in 1962 than I had realized at the time, or most other analysts recognize now. And it could happen again.

One major body of evidence leading to this conclusion--one of several lines of argument I will present in this study--was first revealed publicly by me in an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times on the 25th anniversary of the crisis. Rather than summarize that brief essay, which is already very condensed, I will reproduce it here:

The Day Castro Almost

By Daniel Ellsberg

EKENSINGTON, Calif. Early Sunday morning 25 years ago this week, the Moscow radio began broadcasting Nikita S. Khrushchev's full acceptance of John F. Kennedy's proposal — received just the night before — that the Soviet Union remove all offensive missiles from Cuba in return for nothing more than a conditional American pledge not to invade the island. Thus the Cuban missile crisis was ended by Mr. Khrushchev as abruptly, and for American officials as unexpectedly, as it began.

For the last quarter of a century, American analysts of the crisis have found the suddenness of Mr. Khrushchev's concession to American terms on Oct. 28, 1962, inexplicable. One hypothesis that has been missing from official and scholarly analyses is that the crisis provides an example of how the superpowers can be placed at the mercy of third parties.

Even in Moscow, some were puzzled by the special haste that Sunday.

"They were very, very nervous at this time," Fyodor Burlatsky, Mr. Khrushchev's speech-writer, recalled this month in a conversation about

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the drafters of the Soviet message.

"This letter was not drafted in the Kremlin, nor in the Politburo. It was drafted at Khrushchev's dacha, by a very small group. As soon as it was done, they ran it to the radio station. That is to say, they sent it by car, very fast; as a matter of fact, the car ran into some trouble on the way, an obstruction, which delayed it. When it arrived, the manager of the station himself ran down the steps, snatched the message from the hands of the man in the car, and ran up the steps to broadcast it immediately."

There were good reasons for a sense

Why did Khrushchev blink?

of urgency in Moscow. I learned about one of them from Robert F. Kennedy in 1964 while studying communications between governments in nuclear crises. He told me — in more detail than he later made public in his memoir, "Thirteen Days" — that at his brother's direction on Saturday evening, Oct. 27, 1962, he began a secret discussion with the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly F. Dobrynin. Mr. Kennedy said he impressed on the Ambassador the serious implications of the attacks that day on American reconnaissance aircraft.

Cuban antiaircraft artillery had begun firing Saturday morning at low-flying planes, damaging at least one. Moreover, a surface-to-air missile, presumed to be controlled by Soviet forces, had shot down a U-2 aircraft from an altitude higher than the artillery could reach, causing the first fatality of the crisis.

A transcript of the White House meetings of Oct. 27, recently made public at Harvard University, makes clear that no participant in those discussions questioned the assumption of iron control by Soviet leaders over their own subordinates in Cuba or over Cuban forces. So both types of firing were interpreted, without doubts, as a deliberate escalation, a change of orders by Mr. Khrushchev.

In fact, according to Mr. Burlatsky, "Khrushchev had given very strong, very precise orders that Soviet officers should make no provocation, initiate no attack in Cuba." In particular, he said, the firing of the surface-to-air missile that destroyed the American U-2 "was done absolutely without the direction of Khrushchev and the Soviet high command. In fact it was against their orders, and Khrushchev was very apprehensive about the American reaction."

Robert Kennedy's mission Saturday evening was in part to induce Mr. Khrushchev to recognize the dangers of what Washington interpreted as his decision to escalate and to get him to refrain from further attacks on reconnaissance planes, starting with flights scheduled for the next day.

In his memoir, Mr. Kennedy wrote that he told the Soviet Ambassador

Started World War III

that "our photographic reconnaissance planes would have to continue to fly over Cuba, and if the Cubans or Soviets shot at these planes, then we would have to shoot back."

But in his discussion with me in 1964, Mr. Kennedy was more specific. "If one more plane was destroyed," he said he had told Mr. Dobrynin, "we would hit all the SAM's [surface-to-air missiles] immediately, and probably the [surface-to-surface] missiles as well, and we would probably follow that with an invasion."

This warning was obviously no bluff. The Oct. 27 White House transcript reveals that it conveyed accurately to the Russians the consensus of the White House discussions that afternoon. But the warning almost surely had more impact than was intended, for a reason the President and his advisers did not know about and, as the transcript shows, had failed to discuss even as a possibility.

Very simply, the warning was directed to the wrong party. Even if he could expect to control future firings of surface-to-air missiles, Mr. Khrushchev by this point had no influence over the Cuban antiaircraft artillerymen who threatened low-flying flights. They had begun firing on Saturday morning on the orders of Fidel Castro, who was determined to defend the sovereignty of Cuban air space regardless of Soviet desires to avoid provoking American retaliation.

As Mr. Castro said to Tad Szulc in 1984: "It was we who gave the order to fire against the low-level flights. . . . We had simply presented our viewpoint to [the Russians], our opposi-

tion to low-level flights, and we ordered our batteries to fire on them."

When he heard Mr. Dobrynin's account of his meeting with Robert Kennedy, Mr. Khrushchev could only have concluded that he was on the way to losing both his nuclear missiles and surface-to-air missiles, with heavy Soviet casualties and the likelihood of further escalation as soon as American reconnaissance planes entered Cuban air space, perhaps within 12 hours. If there was any way to avert this, it could only be to announce his acceptance of President Kennedy's Saturday night proposal and to start

A Cuban finger was on the button.

dismantling missiles before a shoot-down and reprisal occurred.

Mr. Khrushchev's order to dismantle the missiles arrived in Cuba between 1 and 3 A.M. Cuban time Sunday, according to my notes from 1964. The dismantling began at 5 A.M. The race to the radio station with the Soviet announcement, which bypassed even slower diplomatic channels, came a few hours later.

It came just in time. At 9 Sunday morning, about the time Moscow Radio began its broadcast, the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed "tentatively to

schedule four low-level recon flights for late afternoon, and that aircraft would fly through any fire encountered." (The President canceled these flights only after Mr. Khrushchev's concession was received.)

In Mr. Castro's opinion, expressed to Mr. Szulc, "I am absolutely certain that if the low-level flights had been resumed we would have shot down one, two or three of these planes. . . . With so many batteries firing, we would have shot down some planes. I don't know whether this would have started the nuclear war."

As it worked out, Mr. Castro did not start a war. Instead, he lost the missile crisis for Mr. Khrushchev. It was indeed, in the end, a Cuban crisis after all. But it was the leaders of the two superpowers who had between them unwittingly contrived to put a trigger to World War III in the hands of Fidel Castro. For reasons he never knew in detail, President Kennedy's estimate during the crisis of the odds of it erupting into general war — "between one in three and even" — does not seem too high.

Mr. Khrushchev paid a heavy political price for withdrawing so abruptly from what he had discovered to be Cuban roulette; yet surely he was wise to do so, without awaiting one more day's spin of the chamber. Explaining his decision to suddenly remove his forces from dangers to which he should never have exposed them, Mr. Khrushchev said later, "A smell of scorching hung in the air."

That warning scent drifts on the wind today, this time from the direction of the Persian Gulf. □

Since this essay was published, a number of Soviet officials have added their voices to Burlatsky's, confirming Khrushchev's lack of control of Castro's antiaircraft or, on the morning of October 27, 1962, the actions of his own Soviet-manned SAM-site. [The latest data on this point has just appeared, in the Winter 1989/90 issue of International Security: "Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch.]

In effect, Khrushchev had no more practical control over the gunners and missilemen firing from Cuba at American planes on Saturday, October 27, 1962 than Gorbachev had over the Chernobyl reactor crew.

Yet not only was Kennedy ignorant of this, even as a possibility, at the time, but his then-national security assistant McGeorge Bundy seems unaware of it to the present day: to the considerable detriment of his analysis, which aims to be reassuring. Thus he argues in Danger and Survival, published in late 1988:

"Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that the slide to unlimited escalation was only one move away on Saturday night. Let us look again at the prospects as they stood then. The worst that we could expect from Khrushchev that night was that he would reject our message and somehow try to extend the dickering he had begun on Friday, but he was in no position to take violent action...He certainly did not stand to gain by maintaining or increasing the challenge created by the killing of Major Anderson the day before, and he had been warned of the dangers in that course...It was unlikely then that Khrushchev would risk a dangerous next step. Control of any escalation still rested with Kennedy..."

It is almost painful, or frightening, to read this account in the present awareness that it was not by Khrushchev's orders or desires that Major Anderson had been attacked. Nor, indeed, was it Khrushchev who was planning to take violent action the next day against American pilots, but Castro: whose antiaircraft attacks were sure to be misinterpreted again by Bundy and Kennedy as an increased "challenge" by Khrushchev himself.

Kennedy's warning had been misdirected, as was his planned response to the next attacks. Without realizing it, he was threatening, and planning, to kill Russians--at surface-to-air missile sites, and possibly at nuclear missile sites--if and when Cubans--under Cuban, not Soviet command--shot down another recon plane.

Unlimited escalation was not inevitable that Saturday night, but the fateful slide toward it, the launching of a cycle of

violence, was indeed but one move away. And, dangerously unknown to Kennedy then--or yet, it seems, to Bundy--the move was to be Castro's: youngest of the three leaders, ignored, enraged and humiliated by both the others, the one whose country was facing direct attack and being overflown by hostile planes...

Nor was lack of control limited to the Soviet/Cuban side. On that same climactic Saturday Kennedy was informed that a US Strategic Air Command U-2 had "strayed accidentally" into Soviet northern airspace (in the same general area where the KAL-007 was shot down in 1983), causing Soviet fighters to scramble in pursuit: possibly, Kennedy was advised, in the belief that it was the precursor to an American first strike.

Bundy himself mentions a few more American "loose ends" that he and his boss did not know at the time, suggesting "imperfect crisis management" (p. 459):

"Only in recent years, for example, have I learned that air force generals seem to have taken it on themselves to give their alert orders in unencrypted language so that their message would more certainly reach Moscow, or that the naval campaign of surveillance over Soviet submarines may have been prosecuted well beyond the immediate requirements of the quarantine [e.g., forcing Soviet submarines to surface, in part by dropping "small" depth charges], or that the army's plans for invasion probably included the movement of tactical nuclear weapons to Cuba.

It may well be, as Bundy says, that each leader "was determined not to let matters spin out of control" (p. 453) but matters were spinning out of control nevertheless, more than they knew.

When the Cuban Missile Crisis is adequately understood, it seems as unwarranted to conclude, with Bundy, that "the risks that might arise as one step followed another...were probably overestimated on the crucial Saturday," or that the overall risks in this or other such crises, past or future, can be seen as "small, given the prudence and the unchallenged final control of the two leaders," as to say the same thing for the risk of a core meltdown at Chernobyl.

My Current Writing Project

A great deal of additional information on the Cuban Missile Crisis has become available in the quarter-century since my 1964 study. In particular, the coincidence of the onset of Soviet glasnost and the 25th anniversary of the crisis stimulated unprecedented symposia of former US and Soviet officials.

Alongside these, a public television series, important Freedom of Information Act requests, and significant memoirs, have resulted in a flood of significant new data just in the last two years. All this has reawakened intense scholarly interest, controversy and creativity. This is true to a lesser degree for other nuclear crises as well.

Earlier research grants over the past several years have permitted me to benefit from reading nearly all of this material, which has reshaped many aspects of my understanding of the crisis. But this reading has also made me aware that a great deal of the data made available to me in 1964 has still not publicly been released,³ and that almost all current analyses and inferences published about the crisis suffer significantly from this lack.

It is clearly time for me to contribute to the ongoing active discussion of the Cuban Missile Crisis and of the nuclear era as a whole by writing up and disseminating the relevant data from my earlier official, classified study--which dealt with a number of other high-level crises, in addition to Cuba--along with my most recent hypotheses, speculations and conclusions reflecting both the new and the old information.

I plan to spend at least the next six months doing this, with articles, research memoranda and a book as the eventual product.

³ One of the historians most knowledgeable of the available materials, Marc Trachtenberg, has specifically drawn attention (International Security, Summer 1985) to the unavailability to scholars of two important documents: "the extensive, almost verbatim notes that Paul Nitze took of meetings during the crisis"; and an analysis requested by the National Security Council on August 23, 1962--well before the missiles were photographed on October 14--"of the probable military, political and psychological impact of the establishment in Cuba of either surface-to-air or surface-to-surface missiles which could reach the U.S." Of the latter Trachtenberg says, "It is unclear whether such a study was ever written; an attempt to locate it via the Freedom of Information Act proved unsuccessful." The Harvard researchers James Blight and David Welch were told by Paul Nitze in 1987 that he had lost his notes of the meetings.

Fortunately, I have not lost my own complete notes, from 1964, on Nitze's notes, nor on the other study in question.

My findings will confront most of the currently accepted interpretations and stand them on their head.

The argument in the Op-Ed essay reproduced above as to why Khrushchev ended the crisis so abruptly on American terms is one example of this. One further example--not hitherto revealed publicly--might be cited here, relating to the prior question of why there was a crisis at all.

In a section headed "What Caused the Crisis?" in their 1989 study On the Brink, the Kennedy School scholars James Blight and David Welch observe: "Khrushchev's decision to deploy missiles in Cuba was only one half of the reason why there was a crisis in October 1962. The other half was the Kennedy Administration's unwillingness to tolerate them." (p. 120)

On the reasoning behind Khrushchev's decision there has been a dramatic transformation of opinion based on revelations of the last two years (see my next section). This has not occurred with respect to the US contribution to the making of a crisis, on which all published accounts, up through the latest ones, agree.

On the basis of interviews with former officials, all scholars have concluded--though with some puzzlement--that in the eyes of participants no "decision" seemed necessary or was consciously made on the issue that Blight and Welch raise. The "intolerable" nature of the secret Soviet deployment, hence the appropriateness of using all necessary military means to remove them, is reported to have been immediately self-evident and unproblematic to all American officials involved.

Blight and Welch summarize a number of recent interviews with participants and joint discussions among former officials and scholars in terms which fully accord with every other published account over the last quarter-century.

The policymakers, Blight and Welch report, "it appears, never seriously debated the issue. For them, it was simply axiomatic that the missiles could not be tolerated. Hawks' Cay conference participants heard Maxwell Taylor put the issue to them with perfect clarity: 'There was no question about the problem,' he said. 'The President announced his objective within an hour after seeing the photographs of the missiles. It was to get the missiles out of Cuba.'"

"When pressed by the scholars, the policymakers appealed to a variety of considerations to explain why the missiles could not be tolerated....But for whatever reasons, it is clear that no one in the ExComm argued that the missiles did not have to be removed from Cuba...To question the unacceptability of Soviet missiles in

Cuba seemed to the ExComm members an abstract, ahistorical and naive exercise."

Blight and Welch make clear their understanding, shared by all analysts, that the President's reaction to the news was not determinative of the others' but merely characteristic, a common judgment independently arrived at by every other official involved.

Thus the American contribution to the existence of the crisis, its perception as a "national security crisis" legitimating and requiring a military response, is not attributed to the President himself. It is seen as a unanimous group response, spontaneous and inevitable, dictated by a Cold War Zeitgeist.

Now, President Kennedy, as it turned out, was not told of the photographs and their import by McGeorge Bundy till 8 AM Tuesday morning, October 16. The first meeting of the officials he wished to consult--later designated the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm)--took place at 11:50 AM, or several hours after General Taylor reports the President had announced his objective (which Kennedy reiterated at the end of this first hour's meeting).

But nearly every official present at that meeting had been told the news on the evening before, October 15. Curiously, although various accounts of the crisis have described the exact circumstances under which these dozen or so officials were given the information, there is not one line in the literature, reflecting interviews and memoirs, that describes the initial judgement of a single one of these men that first evening as to what the US should or should not do.

No evidence has ever been published, and none seems to have been probed for, as to what any of these officials thought, or said to each other, in the 15 hours or so before they heard the President's view of the situation.

It happens that my own interviews of several officials in 1964 did bear on this point, as does my copy of Paul Nitze's notes on the ExComm meetings. [Nitze gave me access to his notes in 1964; no other researcher seems to have seen them.] These data are in considerable contrast to the longstanding consensual account.

Here, for example, is a verbatim copy of my notes from 1964 paraphrasing part of my interview with Paul Nitze, who at the time of the crisis was Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs). The passage relates to the evening of Monday, October 15, when Nitze and Secretary of State Rusk learned that photographs taken the day before and analyzed that afternoon had definitely confirmed the presence of Soviet missiles on Cuba:

Nitze was at State with [Secretary of State] Rusk in dinner with Schroeder [foreign minister of West Germany] when Hilsman [Director of Intelligence and Research, State Department] called Rusk. They were in the midst of a discussion of Cuba. Rusk came back very pale. After dinner, he took Nitze out on terrace and told him. They discussed alternatives. Nitze had already thought about problem, concluded that invasion looked very bad--would be a bloody mess--and that air strike looked better; but that too, at that moment, didn't look good (especially a surprise attack, with political repercussions). He didn't immediately consider blockade. He thought we would just have to eat it. Rusk felt about the same way. (He wouldn't necessarily have predicted this reaction). Both agreed, it was a hideous prospect.

To "eat it" was a Nitze idiom, used elsewhere by him in the ExComm transcripts, for "accept it, reluctantly." The records of the crisis do not show Nitze making this judgment again from the day he joined the ExComm group on October 17, a day after the President had announced his determination not to "eat it"; Nitze was later to be counted among the "hawks."

But Secretary of State Rusk was not the only cabinet-level officer whose first response--like Nitze's--was that the missiles would have to be accepted, given the defects of military measures to remove them.

Secretary of Defense McNamara carried that attitude into the first meeting, and--contrary to the generalization reported by Blight and Welch above--he continued to argue for it in subsequent meetings, even after the President had expressed his contrary view.

Thus, my verbatim transcript of the notes Paul Nitze took of the morning meeting of October 17 [no other record of this meeting has been released] shows McNamara commenting "No military threat justifying response." He proceeds to lay out an approach he had presented to the President the day before, which does accept indefinitely the continued presence in Cuba of the missiles already there, while taking steps to prevent their being increased in number and to prevent their being used.

Thus, when McNamara launched his famous advocacy of a blockade, it was not to meet a goal of eventually eliminating the missiles that had just been discovered but simply to prevent further introduction of missiles into Cuba. His proposal, to which he returned several times, presumed that the missiles already there would be allowed to remain.

He proposed aerial surveillance of the missiles already deployed, to be continued indefinitely into the future, with a warning to the Soviet Union that if there were ever signs that the

missiles were about to be launched, the US would respond not only against the missiles in Cuba but against the Soviet Union.

As McNamara had put it on October 16, "Now this alternative doesn't seem to be a very acceptable one, but wait until you work on the others."

As the Secretary of Defense repeatedly emphasized, in front of the President and the rest of the ExComm, he did not "think there is a military problem here" [posed by the Soviet deployment].

Rather, there was a "domestic political problem," raised precisely by the President's statement at a press conference September 13 that if an offensive capability against the US should be emplaced on Cuba, "the United States would act."

The real purpose of the "little package" he had outlined, McNamara explained, was to deal with the "domestic political problem" by fulfilling minimally the "action requirement" in the President's September 13 statement.

He pointed out: "We didn't say we'd go in and...kill them, we said we'd act. Well, how will we act? Well, we want to prevent their use," which we would do by the surveillance and warning.

Undersecretary of State George Ball commented, "Yeah, well as far as the American people are concerned, action means military action, period."

McNamara pointed to the blockade in his proposal. Ball raised a question whether the actual operation of a blockade "isn't a greater involvement almost than a military action" [i.e., compared to an airstrike] and McNamara agreed that it "might well be."

Correspondingly, Nitze's notes of October 17 show, on the next day McNamara followed his reiteration of his blockade-and-surveillance package with a "Variant. Surveillance. Will attack Soviet Union if preparation to launch against US."

In other words, McNamara's "variant" dropped the blockade, limiting US actions to aerial and electronic surveillance, with offensive action only in the event that the US believed actual missile attack was imminent from Cuba. This implied accepting indefinitely not only the missiles already on Cuba but possible further additions (which a blockade, here eschewed, could prevent).

Such a proposition was consistent with McNamara's repeated judgment, with which Bundy says he and "most others" agreed, that it made no difference at all to the strategic balance, it had no strategic impact on the security of the US, if missiles aimed at the US were based in Cuba or in Russia.

Thus the Secretary of Defense. A final citation, from the same page of Nitze's notes on the October 17 meeting. Just before McNamara's comments, Nitze quotes General Maxwell Taylor, as saying: "Why don't we relax about it. Accept it as another target." [I.e., accept the new missile bases on Cuba as semi-permanent, like ICBM bases in the Soviet Union; simply enter them on Strategic Air Command target lists as new counterforce targets to be struck in the event of general nuclear war, along with those in the Soviet Union.] This thought is offered by the only military man on the ExComm, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

All these previously-unreported attitudes focus new attention on the President's own role in defining the situation as a "crisis," on his possible reasons for doing so--including the personal psychological and domestic political pressures that impact specifically on the President rather than on his chief officials--and on his personal influence in setting the terms of discussion in the ExComm from the beginning, and throughout.

In his own initial bent to military action and his determination that the missiles already in Cuba could not be allowed to remain, Kennedy was neither yielding to nor expressing a clear consensus among ExComm members. Responsibility for the risks involved in subsequent actions is his, in much more than a formal sense.

My research will show that a good deal of evidence, from this crisis and many others, can be brought to bear on the vital question: When, and why, can a future president be expected to choose such risks for the nation and the globe in face of a "political" challenge no more compelling of military action than Kennedy's Defense Secretary saw in the Soviet deployment to Cuba?

Or, to bring this right up to date: When might a future president undertake an action as aggressive as President Bush's invasion of Panama two weeks ago, despite risks that might be greater and national security stakes no more compelling than those presented by General Manuel Noriega?

Some Policy Implications

My interest in this matter is not now, any more than it was in my crisis study of 1964 or my participation in the Pentagon Papers study in 1967-69, primarily that of an historian. My aim, now as then, is an understanding of events that is not only accurate but relevant to policymaking in ways that could help reduce the risk of nuclear war.

I was drawn back to this episode early in 1989 because it was newly apparent that such an understanding is within reach. Since then, even more information has become available, by recent declassification and in meetings with former officials and analysts in Moscow and Havana.

By mid-1989, moreover, my research seemed to have acquired new policy relevance, because it is precisely from the perspective I propose that essential analogies emerge between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the issues in the intense controversy over short-range nuclear missiles and artillery which threatened to divide the NATO Alliance at the NATO Summit in May, 1989 and still persists.

The immediate issue is whether to maintain and "modernize" US and German short-range nuclear missile forces (SNF) in West Germany, or to reduce or eliminate them--along with the more numerous Soviet short-range missiles in East Europe--by an agreement with the Soviets.

Because the Soviets had recently proposed mutual elimination of both SNF and nuclear artillery in Europe, and this is supported by 90% of the German public--a large majority of all parties--elimination of such weapons and perhaps of all nuclear weapons from the continent of Europe had become by mid-1989 a live political option for the first time since such weapons were introduced in the mid-Fifties.

But by November 9--the opening of the Berlin Wall, with the tolerance and even encouragement of Gorbachev--a truly revolutionary perspective opened: the prospect not merely of the reduction and defensive restructuring of Soviet forces in East Germany but the removal of Soviet forces from East Europe, along with the reorientation of other East European forces and of Soviet forces in the USSR away from any possibility of a concerted offensive.

In other words, if Gorbachev's present policies, within a few years (and effectively, right now or very soon) the single legitimating rationale for NATO nuclear first-use policies will have disappeared. This does not mean that US tactical nuclear weapons will automatically be withdrawn from Europe as a consequence of the loss of their rationale.

On the contrary, the Bush Administration and some of its allies, along with many Establishment opinionmakers, continue to insist on the "need" to maintain US nuclear weapons in Europe and on naval vessels, projecting a first-use capability and threat. Yet with the change in political and military context, the removal of nuclear weapons and even the rejection of first-use doctrine in Europe appears political possible (to say the least) in a way that has not been true for almost forty years.

This removal, in turn--in ways discussed below--would open the way to the rejection of nuclear first-use policies worldwide, and to truly radical mutual reductions in tactical and strategic nuclear stockpiles. And its immediate effect in Europe would be a lasting reduction in the risk of nuclear war erupting in an unpremeditated manner from a future crisis.

But none of this will come about, or even get underway, without sharp political debate and struggle, in this country as well as in Europe, since the Bush Administration and the Thatcher Government have made it one of their highest foreign policy priorities to avert elimination of nuclear weapons from Europe and to postpone as long as possible even the start of negotiations over reducing such weapons.

To override this inertial resistance in the US Executive Branch, I believe, will require a considerable reconstitution of the antinuclear educational and lobbying effort of the early Eighties. (A reconstitution of the mass public movement is unlikely, but in the present international context, I believe, unnecessary).

That is not certain to happen without better understanding than is common at present among activists and sympathetic experts--including Congressional staffs--of the urgency of seizing the present unprecedented opportunity to rid Europe of nuclear weapons.

At this point, however, the issues are so poorly discussed in this country that it is scarcely comprehensible why either side feels so strongly about its position: especially in light of the fact that the particular weapons in question are only a fraction of the nuclear weapons available to NATO.

Are short-range missiles and artillery in Europe really crucial to the credibility of NATO's first-use nuclear threats, as Bush and his lieutenants appear to believe? Do they add significantly to the risk of nuclear disaster, as the German public fears?

I believe the answer to each of these questions is, "Yes."

In terms of policy, the second point seems overriding. I agree strongly with the Germans and the Soviets: the SNF should

go, on both sides, and the nuclear artillery with them. But one of the reasons these weapons are unacceptably dangerous is also the main reason that Bush and the NATO Commanders are right, too, to believe that the short-range land-based nuclear weapons are effective first-use threats. Which is a major reason why they cling to them so fanatically.

These weapons are, indeed, significantly more likely to be launched--in the event of armed conflict taking place on the territory of West Germany--than any other element in the NATO panoply of tactical or strategic nuclear weapons. (The term "tactical" for these weapons, by the way, refers to their shorter range--which assures that they would all land in Germany, East or West--not to limits on their explosive power. The Lance warhead, for example, could have the explosive force of 100,000 tons of TNT, equivalent to the power of eight Hiroshima bombs).

The main reason for this for this greater likelihood of detonation is not one that Bush or NATO officials care to discuss openly. The American public has never heard it officially and might, at first, find it hard to take seriously. Most people would be reluctant to believe that responsible officials could have adopted and maintained an approach so fundamentally reckless.

An informed understanding of the real "deterrent" functioning of these particular weapons is long overdue, both for the public and for most specialists. And there is no better way to grasp the logic of these peculiar instruments of deterrent strategy than to examine closely certain aspects of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as that is now susceptible of being understood.

Crucial to the analogy are several of the most striking revelations of the last two years.

First: it is now accepted that Soviet leaders were convinced, in the spring of 1962, that an American invasion of Cuba was highly likely; they expected it in the fall of 1962.

Second, it is accepted--in a dramatic transformation of consensus opinion among American analysts--that a major motive, at least comparably important to any other, driving Khrushchev's decision to deploy medium- and intermediate-range missiles secretly to Cuba was his desire to avert such an invasion by deterring it.

So new, and important, are these revelations (along with newly-declassified documents disclosing--contrary to continued denials by McNamara and Bundy--serious attention by top American officials including the President to contingency planning for a fall invasion of Cuba throughout 1962) that their implications for an overall understanding of the crisis are only beginning to be explored.

In particular, no published commentary has addressed the question, how did Khrushchev see these missiles serving the function of deterring a US invasion?

The first part of the answer is inescapable. To help protect distant Cuba from invasion, Khrushchev was imitating the fundamental strategy of NATO. He sought to deter non-nuclear attack by threatening local first-use of nuclear weapons in response.

Yet how could Khrushchev hope that such a threat, from Cuba, could be credible at all, credible enough to deter attack? (The same question arises for NATO weapons, in the age of parity. I am going to suggest that it has the same answer in both cases.)

After all, he didn't need to be told--though Kennedy went ahead and told him anyway, in his speech of October 22--that if he fired a missile from Cuba the US would treat that as a missile directed from the Kremlin, and retaliate accordingly.

To initiate nuclear attacks on the US would be potentially suicidal for Khrushchev. Why would the Americans fear that he would give such an order, in the event of their attacking Cuba?

The answer is, they didn't, very much. Their main fear was that their attack might trigger the launch of a Soviet nuclear missile without an intervening order from Khrushchev, against Khrushchev's wishes.

A third significant revelation in the last two years--based on recent testimony by McNamara, confirmed by ExComm transcripts--is that he took very seriously the possibility that a medium-range missile (MRBM) would be launched against the US in the event of a US non-nuclear air or ground attack against Cuba.

But his fear was not so much that General Secretary Khrushchev would deliberately order missiles to be fired, under any circumstances. Repeatedly in recent interviews and discussions McNamara has emphasized that what worried him was the possible action of a "Soviet second lieutenant" in Cuba acting without orders to launch a missile in the heat of an American attack on his own unit elsewhere in Cuba.

Even though he saw the probability of such an event as "very low...maybe one in fifty" that prospect was enough, in his own mind--and he felt sure that President Kennedy agreed--to preclude the choice of an air strike or invasion, in face of the very possibility that some of the missiles were operational. And that possibility could not be excluded from the earliest days of the crisis.

To say this is to say that the President and the Secretary of Defense felt effectively deterred from air attack or invasion of Cuba, by the presence of the missiles: just as--we now know--Khrushchev hoped. Medium-range missiles in Cuba deterred non-nuclear attack on Cuba--because those missiles were stationed in the potential combat zone--in a way that comparable numbers of ICBMs in the Soviet Union would not.

In effect, McNamara feared Khrushchev's possible loss of control over these weapons under conditions of combat in Cuba. It was a fear that Khrushchev could not reliably prevent the possible firing of a missile stationed in Cuba, in the event of a US non-nuclear attack in the vicinity of such weapons.

That concern was no layman's fantasy. By that time in his career, Secretary of Defense McNamara had good reason to know the limits on his own practical control of personnel and weapons, even in the nuclear sphere. (As a command and control specialist, I myself had reported hair-raising tales of the looseness of American controls to McGeorge Bundy in his first month in the White House). He simply assumed that Khrushchev's control had similar limits.

Some Soviet experts would have disputed him; the image of Soviet command relationships among specialists in those days portrayed obsessive centralised control, iron discipline, Godlike authority, both over Soviet and "satellite" officials and troops.

Hence no American (not even McNamara) so much as imagined, when a U-2 was shot down by a Soviet SAM on the climactic Saturday of the crisis, that a Soviet officer had taken first blood without authorization from Khrushchev, indeed against his wishes. Nor that Khrushchev had been unable to prevent his Third World ally Fidel Castro from risking the survival of the Soviet Union by firing at American planes.

Yet so it was. McNamara's apprehension about the possible "initiative" of a Soviet nuclear missile officer in Cuba was not misplaced. Indeed, had McNamara known at the time the extent to which control of non-nuclear operations had slipped away from civilian leaders on both sides, it could only have confirmed his concern.

What he feared a Soviet junior officer might do with a nuclear missile if his region of Cuba was under direct attack was what a Soviet subordinate did do with a surface-to-air missile in the presence over Cuba of a high-flying U-2 reconnaissance plane, Saturday morning October 27.

In any case, it follows that the effective deterrent against invasion posed by Khrushchev's deployment of nuclear missiles to the territory of Cuba was the tacit, perhaps inadvertent threat of

his own loss of control: the implicit threat of an unauthorized missile firing by a subordinate commander under attack.

That threat depended essentially on the ground-based "forward" location of the weapons, where their crews would inevitably come under direct attack, or fear it imminently, in the event of American invasion or non-nuclear airstrike.

Here, then, is the functional link between the medium-range missiles (MRBMs) that Khrushchev sent to Cuba and the short-range nuclear missile forces (SNF) and nuclear artillery that have been stationed in Europe since the mid-Fifties.

To be sure, the analogy is even closer to the intermediate-range Pershing II and cruise missiles that were recently removed from Germany under the INF agreement. But contrary to most analysis, it is not the range of the weapon that is functionally essential, but its location--in a potential combat zone--hence its vulnerability to attack or capture and to a "use it or lose it" mentality among its local commanders.

After all, any use of short-range nuclear weapons in Europe, whether authorized or not, is highly likely to lead in short order to the launching of longer-range weapons that can hit the Soviet Union. So the SNF are a tripwire for strategic weapons, just as the US ground troops in Europe are a tripwire for the SNF that accompany them.

The strategy that Khrushchev chose in 1962 to deter invasion of Cuba was the strategy that the US pressed on NATO in the mid-Fifties to deter invasion of West Germany and Western Europe. It is the strategy which President Bush is pressing Chancellor Kohl to maintain and "modernize" today. Indeed, we can better understand the specifics of the NATO strategy in the light of Khrushchev's "defense" of Cuba.

It is a strategy of deterring non-nuclear attack on an ally or client by threatening to initiate tactical nuclear warfare. More specifically, these first-use threats are implemented and made credible--especially against an opponent that could retaliate with nuclear weapons--by stationing nuclear weapons directly on the soil and relatively near the borders of the country being "defended."

An additional element is to accompany the weapons with sizeable numbers of one's own troops in the ally's territory, to make it still more plausible that either the national authorities or local commanders will use the tactical nuclear weapons to "protect" these national units or to avenge their loss. (Khrushchev, it now appears, sent 40,000 Soviet troops along with the missiles. The US keeps over 300,000 troops in West Europe as a "tripwire.")

Weapons and troops so placed in the path of any attacking force pose an inherent threat of possible nuclear launches that are uncontrolled and unauthorized by national-level commanders. Under conditions of nuclear parity, that implicit threat can be far more credible than the most explicit commitment that national authorities will deliberately initiate first-use.

Can it be credible enough to be deterrent? In Cuba, it was.

The Cuban Missile Crisis involved the strongest challenge to any deterrent nuclear forces--Soviet MRBMs in Cuba--to occur in the nuclear era. It was the one time when the commanders of one superpower were poised for and actively contemplating imminent attack on part of the nuclear forces of the other.

And in that test, the Soviets' implicit threat of unauthorized action--whether Khrushchev had ever consciously intended such a threat or not--operated strongly on the mind of the opposing Commander-in-Chief and his second in command, according to the latter's direct testimony.

There can be little doubt, to be short about it, that the short-range nuclear missiles and nuclear artillery on both sides of the borders in Europe--along with forward-based aircraft-- are just as effectively deterrent, and for exactly the same reason.

The often-cited notion that a President in Washington would be much more willing to order such weapons launched, because he hoped to keep the resulting two-sided nuclear war limited within the borders of Germany, is at most a small and implausible part of that reason. A President who believed that could believe anything.

What is far more plausible is that in face of overwhelming attack some of these forward-based weapons would be fired because local commanders would fire them, from a variety of motives. That is credible, because it is all too true.

In fact, given the nuclear stand-off between the two Pacts, no other elements of either side's nuclear posture are remotely so credible for first-use. Not carrier aircraft or cruise missiles (though these would be closest); certainly not submarines or home-based missiles or bombers.

One could well conclude that these vulnerable, ground-based short-range nuclear forces are essential to the effective credibility of a strategy relying on threats of initiating and, if necessary, escalating nuclear warfare. That calculation underlies the Bush Administration position.

It is true--for NATO weapons and probably for Warsaw Pact forces as well-- that sergeants and lieutenants at the firing positions of SNF and nuclear artillery confront locks on the nuclear weapons, so-called Permissive Action Links, which prevent crews from firing them, initially, without codes from higher command.

But how much higher? That is a secret. One thing, however, is sure: it is not the President, or any commander in Washington, who monopolizes those codes, as the public is led to imagine. Nor are they held tight by a four-star general at NATO Headquarters. Division or corps command is a possible locus: regiment, even battalion not out of the question, depending on the weapons, and perhaps on conditions of alert.

All of these levels of command are subject to non-nuclear attack in the earliest minutes or hours of actual conflict, and subject to being overrun in hours or days. Anyone attacking them would be right to worry about nuclear detonations, authorized or not. And so would their own national authorities. And all the rest of us.

Yet the attack could come anyway. That too is a lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis. That dress rehearsal for superpower war, that field test of crisis stability under near-combat conditions, demonstrates both sides of the issues raised by the short-range nuclear weapons in Europe.

Of course, since November 9, 1989, the likelihood of a Warsaw Pact offensive into West Europe spearheaded by Soviet tanks has come to seem virtually impossible, so long as Gorbachev's present policies prevail. But that does not mean that armed conflict in the still highly-armed neighborhood of West and East Germany is totally ruled out, whether in the long run or even the short.

Conflict in East Europe is, if anything, more likely than before (we have just seen civil war in Rumania, and the resurgence of territorial and ethnic disputes in the Balkans and elsewhere) with the possibility of expansion and spillover. Direct involvement of Soviet troops in such a conflict would almost surely require a successor to Gorbachev in power. Western involvement, amazingly, might not require new officials; the French foreign minister last month, seconded by the US Secretary of State, proposed the possibility of armed involvement by Western forces or "volunteers"--along with Soviet intervention!--into the fighting in Rumania.

Spillover into the regions where US nuclear weapons are deployed might be very unlikely. But what excuse is there for permitting the slightest possibility of this, by maintaining weapons in that historic arena which, in connection with such conflicts, lack any conceivable legitimate function? (Whatever the

imagined legitimacy of nuclear threats in deterring Soviet blitzkrieg, it certainly does not extend to nuclear threats or nuclear war in circumstances like these).

To believe that their presence in an area of historic conflict is tolerable must be to believe that highest-level self-control and operational control in crises is absolute, quite literally absolute. And the Cuban Missile Crisis disproves that.

The Cuban Missile Crisis does show that extended deterrence, the use of first-use nuclear threats against non-nuclear attack against non-nuclear attack, can work. Up to a point. It also shows how it could fail. In 1962 it could have failed despite leaders on both sides who really were "determined" to avoid losing control and going to war.

And if this strategy fails in Europe, it can blow the lid off the Northern Hemisphere. That is the trouble with the strategy, and with the Bush Administration's position. That was true before the Wall came down, and it is still true.

The lesson I indicated in the first section of this paper is all the more pointed in the light of the revelations mentioned in this third part.

On the one hand, what McNamara's recent testimony implies is that both he and--after a day or two's reflection--President Kennedy, desperately anxious to avoid nuclear war, were secretly determined to avoid at all costs an air attack or invasion of Cuba that might bring it about. If this inference is correct, their strategy and aims were considerably more cautious than some others in the ExComm believed them to be.

On the basis of other evidence (not discussed here) both McNamara and Kennedy seem clearly to have been ready to offer a public trade--the mutual withdrawal of US warheads in Turkey along with Soviet missiles in Cuba--rather than to carry out the air strike or invasion they were ostentatiously preparing.

In short, though no commentator seems to have drawn the blunt inference, both the threat implicit in these preparations and Robert Kennedy's explicit ultimatum to Ambassador Dobrynin on the night of October 27--threatening an air strike in 48 hours and rejecting any possibility of a public trade--appear to have been, in the eyes of the President, enormous bluffs.

Moreover, he expected them to fail, and almost surely intended to follow them with major concessions to end the crisis, including an offer publicly to withdraw the Turkish missiles.

And yet: the moral of the tale told in my Op-Ed piece above is that despite all these private resolutions, deterrence came within hours of breaking down.

Despite the President's conscious determination to avoid a war with Soviet forces, his willingness to do almost anything--even make humiliating public concessions--rather than to test the discipline of Soviet missilemen by attacking them, John Kennedy could have found himself doing just that on Sunday, October 28, if Cuban antiaircraft gunners had been closer to their marks on Saturday afternoon.

The President's bluffs--and Khrushchev's, too--came close to exploding. Contrary to their wishes and expectations, and in ways they neither controlled nor were aware of at the time, Kennedy and McNamara might well have found themselves, a few hours after Robert Kennedy's threats to Dobrynin, taking the actions and getting the war they were anxious to avoid. And it could have had, in the end, the nuclear consequences that they most feared.

Khrushchev's clever strategy did not end well for him; but it risked, and barely avoided, far worse. Could the same strategy in Europe--now being doggedly defended by the Bush Administration -- go so badly?

We could already rule that out--even before the change in Soviet doctrine and deployment and then, the opening of the Wall--the possibility of a premeditated, aggressive surprise attack by Soviet forces "out of the blue," for the purpose of taking over Western Europe. That was no more a realistic concern under Brezhnev or Khrushchev than it is under Gorbachev. If that were the only way that Soviet tanks might confront NATO SNF, there would be little to worry about.

When Pentagon planners postulated a Soviet blitzkrieg offensive against West Germany--or when Soviet tank divisions in East Germany rehearsed such a "counteroffensive," as they have frequently done in training maneuvers over the last generation--both sides had contingencies in mind that were considerably more realistic, though their planned responses were not. (All this, of course, has been overtaken by recent events).

If an uprising in East Germany should have led to fighting between East German troops and Soviet divisions; if West German units should find they could not bear to watch Germans being slaughtered by Russians, and prepare to or do cross the border to intervene; if Soviet tank divisions in East Germany, not having yet abandoned their operational plans and "set" of the last generation, should have launched an offensive counterattack into West Germany...then the discipline of American and West German nuclear artillerymen and missilemen near the borders would quickly be tested en masse, perhaps fatally.

Again, this was no layman's fantasy (though this particular sequence is rapidly becoming, or has already become since November 1989, a former military concern: unless Gorbachev should be replaced by a hardliner within the next year). For many years American and NATO planners regarded this sequence of events not just as one among many ways that conflict might arise between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, but as perhaps the most likely of dangerous contingencies.

An authoritative article in the most recent issue of Foreign Affairs starts by alluding to this traditionally secret concern. ["Central European Security," Summer 1989, by Henry Owen and Edward C. Meyer: the latter having been Army Chief of Staff under Carter and Reagan, the former head of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department under Johnson and Ambassador-at-large under Carter.] It begins (p. 22):

"The threat of war in Central Europe still exists. One does not have to credit Soviet leaders with an intent to attack Western Europe to believe this. The peoples of Eastern Europe are no more satisfied today with Soviet dominance than they were before 1914 with Austrian and Russian rule. Nor is it yet clear that the Soviet rulers are more ready to yield control of this region than were the Romanovs or the Hapsburgs. [This last judgment, of course, is now overtaken.]

Indeed, central Europe remains second only to the Middle East in its potential for conflicts that could embroil the great powers."

The unstated link between unrest and "war" in this passage is presumably something like the sequence described above, which includes some form of Western intervention into East Europe (as suggested in December, for Rumania, by the French Foreign Minister). What the authors do not explain is just how traditional US and NATO nuclear first-use policy--which they propose to maintain and protect against Western public discontent(as does President Bush and many centrist commentators even after the events of November and December)--relates helpfully, or legitimately, to this plausible picture of the continuing "threat."

Today as I write this--January 2, 1990--Tom Wicker's column in the New York Times salutes the new year and decade with this comment:

"We face, in fact, a changed and not a new world; and in some ways, it's more nearly an old world predating the cold war that has come to an end.

The German problem is certainly not new, though it now arises in a different context. The conflicts of Eastern

Europe, once the confining cloak of Communist rule has been thrown off, may well be reawakened in all their ancient malignities. Mikhail Gorbachev's struggle with the dissident republics of his forcefully built empire is a magnification of a problem that has plagued the USSR almost from its inception."

Suppose that in the next year or two, independence movements in the USSR like those that have revolutionised East Europe should lead to a hardline replacement of Gorbachev by a leader and faction determined to preserve empire not only in the USSR itself but in parts of East Europe. Administration officials, speaking on background, have not only imagined, they have come close to predicting such a sequence.

As illustrated by events that occurred--and still others that were postulated--in Rumania last month, December, 1989, a complex and ambiguous combination of civil war, revolution and international intervention could result. If that conflict originated or spilled over into East or West Germany, it would be taking place among the most heavily nuclear-armed units in the world.

That really should be changed. And not some years from now. Starting to negotiate today to remove such weapons promptly from both sides of the border would not be too soon. It is what the Soviets and West Germans have proposed, against the resistance of the Bush Administration: which should hear on this point from the Congress and the public.

A lesson for NATO, and the American public, from a crisis 27 years ago: It was as reckless and irresponsible for the American and West European governments to bring short-range nuclear weapons into a potential zone of conflict in the Fifties, and to keep them there till today (and for the Soviets to match such deployments in the Eighties) as it was for Nikita Khrushchev to send medium-range missiles to Cuba.

More generally--in the absence finally of the threat ("if," as Wicker says in his column today, "there ever was one") of a Hitlerian blitzkrieg by Soviet tank columns against West Europe--it should at last be seen as profoundly unacceptable to defend any borders or national interests by the threat of deliberate first-use of nuclear weapons, still less by the tacit threat of losing control of nuclear weapons, under any circumstances whatever.

That rules out anything close to present US strategy or nuclear deployment in Western Europe or South Korea and on US surface naval vessels. Likewise, covert nuclear dimensions of US intervention policies throughout the Third World. Likewise, the "deterrence" policies of a number of lesser nuclear states.